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ABSTRACT

Although different philosophies may motivate presidential-press relations, causing frequent friction or adversity, there is nevertheless a strong degree of cooperation and collaboration between the press and a president of the United States. This interdependence has been particularly evident in recent administrations, and it progresses chronologically through a three-stage cycle. In the "honeymoon" stage, a pleasant period beginning after a president's election and inauguration, the president's and the media's definitions of what is newsworthy happen to coincide. The honeymoon stage usually consists of human interest items and stories about the administration's goals and plans during official tenure. The second, or competitive, stage begins when the president's and the media's definitions of news begin to drift apart. This stage is characterized by news manipulation, with the administration attempting to ensure that its "news" is the only news the press receives. When a president makes a conscious decision to place reelection--therefore the preservation or rejuvenation of popularity--above the development of new programs, the third phase, detachment, has been initiated. A review of the Carter administration's relations with the press shows that it has progressed predictably through these stages. (RL)

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# PRESS RELATIONS: CARTER'S EXAMPLE

**This report was written by Peter S. Kindsvatter, a masters candidate at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.**

Recent executive branch excesses — Watergate, the Pentagon Papers, and the activities of the CIA, to name a few — have boosted press-presidential relations into the limelight. As political scientists Michael Grossman and Martha Kumar note, the relationship is receiving increasing emphasis:

> Whereas at one time the difficulty reporters might have in getting interviews or information was regarded as their own problem, today it may be featured on the evening news. The fact that Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter have regarded good media relations as a basic policy objective of their administrations is undoubtedly a result of the increasingly public nature of the relationship and of the public's interest in and awareness of the importance of media.[1]

This development is undoubtedly healthy in a democracy. However, because it was brought about by the excesses of the Johnson and Nixon administrations, the interest centers primarily on the relationship's adversative nature, as evidenced by this description from Timothy Crouse's **The Boys on the Bus**:

> Every president, when he first enters the White House promises an "open administration." He swears he likes reporters, will cooperate with them, will treat them as first-class citizens. The charade goes on for a few weeks, or months, or even a couple of years. All the while, the President is struggling to suppress an overwhelming conviction that the press is trying to undermine his Administration, if not the Republic. He is fighting a maddening urge to control, bully, vilify, prosecute, or litigate against every free-thinking reporter and editor in sight. . . . Every President from Washington on came to recognize the press as a natural enemy, and eventually tried to manipulate it and muzzle it.[2]

While it is undoubtedly true that the adversative element of this relationship is a strong one, it is insufficient to explain the enormous amount of cooperation, and even collaboration, that occurs in the press-presidential relationship.[3] One must forgive Crouse if he overstates the case; he was writing his book during the days of the Nixon administration.

A more accurate description of the press-presidential relationship, one which does explain the cooperation and collaboration, is given by political scientist and researcher C. Richard Hofstetter:

> News media and politicans coexist in an environment perhaps best characterized as unstable and dynamic: both news personnel and politicians are essential to each other in different ways, and yet both operate within a context in which the causes and consequences of the other's behavior are frequently at odds. News personnel need access to newsworthy events that politicians control in large part, and politicians need channels of access to the public that news personnel control in large part.[4]

Hence, while the basic motives of each group differ, both the press and the president are essentially dependent upon one another for their success. This interdependence will be examined through a chronological study of the Carter administration.

However, before examining the Carter administration, it is necessary to trace the development of the White House press corps from an inconsequential handful of reporters to the considerable organization that exists today. A familiarity with this organization is necessary for understanding the degree to which the press-presidential relationship has become institutionalized. This institutionalization increases the need for cooperation.

### The White House Press Corps

Considering the present interest in press-presidential relations, it is interesting to note that at the turn of the century such a relationship did not exist on any regular basis. White House press corps tradition dates back to 1895, when William W. Price of the Washington **Evening Star** stationed himself at the Pennsylvania Avenue portico, intent upon interviewing presidential callers as they departed the White House. By the turn of the century, a sizable group of reporters could be found at the White House doorstep on any day.[5]

Teddy Roosevelt, the president at the time, saw fit to take pity on the reporters. When the White House was renovated in 1904, Roosevelt ordered that a room next to his secretary's office in the new west wing be set aside for the press.[6] The

**Summary:** The White House press corps increasingly has become an institutional part of the presidency. Consequently, the press-presidential relationship, best described as one of interdependence, progresses through three stages: the honeymoon, the competitive phase, and the detachment phase. The Carter administration provides a classic example of this development.

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press has been installed in the White House ever since.

Roosevelt is recognized as the originator of the present system of press-presidential relations. He was the first to see how the two organizations could assist one another, as Henry Fairlie explains:

> He [Roosevelt] rushed back from McKinley's funeral for a meeting he had arranged with the heads of the three press associations, the United Press, the Associated Press and the New York Sun press service. He had confidence in them, he said, at least he had confidence in two of them, and would have to wait to get to know the third. The other two then vouched for their colleague, and Roosevelt at once said that he had confidence in him also. There would be a partnership. He would trust them. They could trust him.[7]

Hence, the "partnership" was born — a partnership which grew and prospered, becoming an integral part of today's presidential administration.

With the advent of the Wilson administration came the first formal presidential press conferences. Wilson promised to meet with reporters twice a week.[8] These conferences were discontinued in 1915 (thereby setting another precedent that continues today — the lack of, or the decrease in number of, press conferences in the later part of a president's term of office). However, they would become a part of every future administration.

The formal press conference gave rise to the White House Correspondents' Association. The White House "regulars" wanted to limit access to the press conferences — the White House beat was becoming very competitive, and the regulars wanted priority.

The association was founded in 1914 with 11 charter members, and the most senior regular, William W. Price, was the first chairman.[9]

The ranks of the White House reporters continued to swell. In 1934, FDR — the "other" Roosevelt who was so adept in dealing with the media — expanded the White House press room to accommodate them. The media-conscious Roosevelt also expanded the scope of press-presidential relations by being the first to install a full-time press secretary in the White House.[10] And, as Fairlie notes, this press secretary was no mere front man for the president:

> . . . Franklin Roosevelt brought to the White House a friend and supporter for many years past, Stephen Early, the first . . . really considerable press secretary to a President. . . . What we see first in him is the press secretary as intimate and trusted adviser, the first to the bedside of the President in the morning.[11]

Every president since FDR has had a full-time press secretary, and as the importance of the media's role in the relationship increased, the presidents added assistants. Today, presidential press secretary Jody Powell has a staff of more than 40 in his White House Office of Information, and this is a decrease in number from the Nixon administration.[12]

This growth in the office of the press secretary was in direct response to the growing number of White House reporters, whose ranks swelled considerably with the advent of radio and television. John F. Kennedy, the first president to master television, instituted the live, televised press conference, thereby firmly and permanently installing this new media in the White House.[13]

In 1970, during the Nixon administration, the White House press facilities were again expanded by constructing a separate structure on top of FDR's swimming pool. These facilities, described by F. B. Marbut, are in use today:

> The new press facilities provide multiple-room space on two levels for reporters' desks, direct-line telephones, broadcast booths, two comfortably furnished lounges, coin vendors for snacks and drinks, and other comforts and conveniences. Glass partitioned rooms or booths are built in for the Associated Press, United Press International and the major foreign news agencies, and newspapers that maintain full-time staff members at the White House. Desks and telephones are available for reporters who appear there on a part-time basis.[14]

A significant number of correspondents make regular use of these facilities. Sixty or more reporters attend the daily briefings conducted by the press secretary or one of his assistants. Well over 300 reporters can be expected for a presidential press conference. Things have changed considerably since William Price stood at the White House entrance in 1895.

The White House Correspondents' Association has grown from its 11 charter members in 1914 to more than 900 members today. The offshoot White House News Photographers' Association can add its 400 members for a total of approximately 1,300 members.[15] The White House has issued 1,800 press passes as of January 1977, although, as noted by former press secretary Ron Nessen, many of these passes serve only to "help the bearer cash checks."[16]

**Stages of the Press-Presidential Relationship**

The press-presidential "partnership," as first struck between Teddy Roosevelt and the wire services, continues today to an even greater extent. Although different philosophies may motivate the partners, causing frequent friction or adversity, there is nevertheless a strong degree of cooperation and collaboration — there must be if the institutionally inseparable partners are to succeed.

This relationship, as evidenced in all recent administrations, progresses chronologically through a three-stage cycle.[17] The Carter administration is no exception — in fact, it is a classic example. The first of these three stages is the honeymoon.

**The Honeymoon Stage**

The first stage begins with the president's inauguration. It would not be incorrect to include the period from the end of the November election to the January inauguration in this stage as well.

"Honeymoon" is the term most often used to describe this period. However, it is something of a misnomer; it implies that the media are deliberately treating the new administration as deferentially as a husband treats his new bride. In actuality, this honeymoon, or pleasant period, occurs only because the president's and the media's definitions of what is newsworthy happen to coincide. Grossman and Kumar, therefore, prefer the term "alliance" in defining this stage:

> During the phase of alliance a silent partnership exists between White House officials and the representatives of news organizations assigned to cover the presidency. This partnership is based on two elements: the common definition by both parties of what are newsworthy items; and the reporters' willingness to provide an unfiltered conduit to the White House for messages that the

> administration wishes to convey to the public. There is little conflict between the objectives of the reporters and White House officials during this phase; the major news organizations are interested in presenting to their audience the same items about the administration that the White House wants publicized.[18]

The new occupant of the Oval Office, if he is wise, will take maximum advantage of this media conduit while it lasts. The first step, taken even before the inauguration, is to promise to conduct an "open" administration and to fulfill the inevitable campaign promises of open, honest government. Since presidential and media ideas of what is news happen to coincide during this stage, the end result of this openness is favorable publicity for the new president.

Carter, like his predecessors, was quick to promise such an open administration. The Los Angeles **Times** carried (11-27-76) this headline: "Carter May Open Cabinet, Legislative Meetings to Reporters, Press Aide says." Note this lead in an **Editor and Publisher** article dated Nov. 13, 1976: "Press relations with the Carter administration are likely to be different, more open, than the press' relationships with the Nixon and Ford administrations. . . ."[19] Finally, Dom Bonafede reported a few weeks after the inauguration that:

> Throughout his campaign and since his inauguration, Carter expressed a desire to lower institutional barriers through a series of personal contacts with the electorate. He maintained that an open presidency was essential to his success.[20]

And what is the nature of this news that gushes forth from the media conduit in the early months of a new, open administration? Here is a typical example:

> "11 A.M. Photo Opportunity of the White House Tree House. 10:55 pickup at the West Wing Press Room." — Notice on the White House press room bulletin board, April 12, 1977.[21]

One might wonder if, perhaps, the White House press corps might not be slightly insulted by this notice. But, of course, such is not the case:

> At 10:55 that morning, 34 reporters, photographers, and cameramen lined up at the door of the White House press room. Then, led by Mary Hoyt, Rosalynn Carter's press secretary, they trooped across the broad green sweep of the South Lawn toward a gigantic Atlas cedar tree and the White House Tree House . . . . the skirmish line of press people advancing . . . — their microphones and sound booms jutting up like rifles — looked for all the world like an infantry platoon moving through the Vietnamese jungle.[22]

Such human interest items are, indeed, one of the most popular news topics during the honeymoon stage: What are the interests of the new president? What are his hobbies? What is his family like? His staff? Such stories provide harmless publicity for the president, and the media audience is interested in learning about the new first family.

Another popular news topic during this honeymoon stage is the new administration's goals and plans. Everyone is curious to know what the new administration has in mind, and since there has not yet been any implementation, there is no room for criticism. Again, both parties agree on what is news. A good example is Carter's first "fireside chat" on Jan. 29, 1977:

> Sitting casually in the White House library, wearing a sweater and tie, Carter spoke at one point of having eliminated "expensive and unnecessary luxuries" of government, such as limousine service for many top officials. Government officials "can't be sensitive to your problems," he said, "if we are living like royalty here in Washington."[23]

Obviously, no one is in a position to criticize this statement made only days after the inauguration.

Finally, another favorite is to make "initial comparisons" between the new, open administration and the previous, repressive administration (And, of course, the old administration is always "repressive," just as the new one is always "open"). The new presidency almost always receives high marks in this comparison; so, once again, both partners are happy. Evidence this April 1977 report by Sanford Ungar:

> Comparisons in this area are hazardous, but the atmosphere in the White House press room . . . underwent a dramatic change during the first weeks of Jimmy Carter's presidency. In contrast to Gerald Ford's final months in office, when rancor and bitterness were the order of the day at White House briefings . . . it was as if someone had walked through the room on Inaugural Day spraying good will into the air.[24]

With such press coverage, it is small wonder that both sides are basically happy during the honeymoon phase. It is a phase during which the media are eager for any and all information about the new administration, and the wise president will see to it that plenty is made available. Ed Bradley, a White House correspondent for CBS, noted during the early Carter administration:

> Photo opportunities, briefings, releases, more photo opportunities. Most of it doesn't mean a damn thing. But the White House grinds it out and we eat it up. The network wants everything we can give them on the President. It's like "Jaws" over there. The jaws are always open.[25]

But all good things must come to an end, and such is the case for the honeymoon. The length of the honeymoon period depends, to some extent, upon the actions of the administration. In Carter's case, the end came sooner rather than later, primarily because he tried too hard to exploit the media conduit in an attempt to boost his popularity. The press eventually balked at the flood of presidential imagery and media events, which were unsupported by any real action. Thus, the Carter administration reluctantly found itself in the competitive stage of the relationship.

### The Honeymoon's Over—The Competitive Stage

> Involved in the impressionistic conclusions [about the newly elected president] is the often cited honeymoon phenomenon which sees a chief executive enjoying a temporary period of cooperation with Congress and the press and broad public approval. At some point during his first term, this merges into a more normal competitive relationship with the press, if not an estrangement.[26]

And so, as political scientist Elmer Cornwell suggests, the competitive phase begins emerging when the president's and the media's definitions of news, which coincided during the honeymoon phase, begin to drift apart. As Grossman and Kumar explain:

> An end comes to the alliance between the White House and the news media when reporters become interested in news stories that emphasize the ad-

> ministration's involvement in controversies and conflicts among personalities and over policies. An activist president who has made clear policy commitments provides reporters with stories and conflicts with adversaries over policy, as well as stories about conflicts among presidential supporters over which tactics should be used to win the policy battle. In the case of less active presidents, the passage of time usually provides reporters with the opportunity to produce stories about conflicts among advisers who are urging policy commitments, or at the very least stories about which adviser or cabinet official is currently on top of the White House pecking order. The shared definition of newsworthy items that led to stories supportive of the president and his policies during the phase of alliance dissolves in the phase of competition.[27]

President Carter must be placed in the "less-active" category. In fact, for him it is virtually necessary to establish a third category, a "least-active." It was a lack of activity, coupled with a rather blatant continuation of his campaign "imagery" well into his term of office, that prompted the press to bring the honeymoon period to an end.

This was a gradual process, which occurred in the March to June 1977 period. It started with a recognition by the press that Carter was indeed a master of imagery, and that he would use this ability to gain popularity. This tactic was immediately obvious from the first day, as seen in journalism professor Hillier Krieghbaum's description of Carter's inauguration:

> Increasingly during the 20th Century, these inaugurations . . . have become media pseudo-events and provided chances for leaders of any new administration to set a tone, symbolically at least, for the years to come.
>
> President Jimmy Carter and his colleagues were no exception to this tradition. . . . The theme of a "people's inaugural," picked up by the committee handling the affair, had populist overtones. . . . The people should see their new president. It was planned that way.[28]

As indeed it was — the Carter family walk down Pennsylvania Avenue, the informality of the oath-taking, the elimination of the traditional inaugural ball, even the elimination of "Hail to the Chief" — all were designed to continue Carter's anti-Washington, good-old-boy campaign theme.

There were similar occurrences, notes **Broadcasting** magazine in March 1977:

> In media-conscious Washington, President Jimmy Carter — after only two months in office — is acquiring the status of a star. . . . White House aides say they are thrilled and happy with the three Carter "specials" — the so-called fireside chat, the radio call-in show on CBS and the town hall meeting in Clinton, Mass."[29]

Undoubtedly, the Carter administration was well pleased with these honeymoon "specials" — so pleased that they apparently did not see the hole they were digging for themselves. The more astute president-watchers in the press corps began to grumble about the blatant imagery. In March 1977, Washington **Post** correspondent David Broder wrote (Miami **Herald**, 3-24-77) that there was no action backing the imagery:

> In his first two months as President, Jimmy Carter has achieved a triumph of communications in the arena of public opinion. He has not reduced unemployment, curbed inflation, simplified government or done most of the other marvelous things he promised in his campaign. But he has transformed himself from the very shaky winner of a bungled campaign into a very popular President, whose mastery of the mass media has given him real leverage with which to govern.

And, indeed, Carter's standing in the polls initially improved. But the imagery campaign continued too long, without action, and the press grew increasingly wary. An interesting memo written by Carter's pollster, Patrick Cadell, was leaked to the media — a memo that began attracting the attention of the media "pack." Dom Bonafede described the memo in a May 1977 article:

> . . . Cadell has been the subject of recent news stories highlighting a leaked memorandum he drafted for Carter, advising him to build a base of popular support by employing the symbols of office and stressing style over substance in the early months of the presidency.[30]

Others began criticizing Carter's symbolism tactics. **The New Republic** described Carter's actions as "Running in Office," accusing him of confusing symbolism with substance.[31]

And so, the honeymoon was over. Carter had pushed the symbolism too far. Viewing the period in retrospect, after the dust had settled, Bonafede states Carter's mistake:

> Media massaging may work nicely during a campaign, where the stress is on appearances, but less successfully in office, where the emphasis is on action and results.[32]

**The Competitive Stage: Characterized by News Manipulation**

In the competitive stage, when the White House press corps and the president no longer share the same definition of what is news, the president attempts to ensure that his "news" is the only news the press receives. He does this by preventing, as much as possible, the occurrence of damaging, unofficial leaks (except for what he wants leaked). Hence, the open administration that received so much fanfare during the honeymoon begins to close up:

> The phase of competition is characterized by the chief executive's attempts to manipulate his relations with the news media. There is a retrenchment from the open presidency; the White House specifies the conditions under which officials may talk to reporters and seeks to curb unauthorized disclosures of information.[33]

Carter's administration was certainly no exception to this rule. The empty symbolism campaign that was responsible for spoiling the honeymoon was discontinued. Press-presidential relations became more formalized. As did previous administrations, Carter's began attempting to control the amount of "leaked" information. New York **Times** correspondent Nicholas Horrock reported (Washington **Star**, 5-14-78) that:

> The Carter administration is moving to tighten its control over the flow of unauthorized information from the government, according to defense, intelligence and White House officials.
>
> These sources report that high-level concern over the flow of information has become as great as it was in the early months of the Nixon ad-

ministration. . . .

. . . It has moved to tighten control over the flow of information when officials were increasingly embarrassed by public disclosure of internal debate, disputes and policy decisions.

Many White House watchers felt that the installment of Carter's former campaign manager, Gerald Rafshoon, into the White House as an official presidential adviser on July 1, 1978, signaled that the manipulation effort would commence in earnest:

> Some Washington analysts express surprise that Carter has waited this long to launch an intensive campaign of news management. But with the help of Gerald Rafhsoon . . . the White House is making up for lost time.[34]

Rafshoon's primary responsibility has been to tighten up the White House information flow and to coordinate what is being said by the various executive branch departments. Rafshoon said in an interview:

> There hasn't been enough opportunity to coordinate communication on the issues. . . . People around here are coming from all different directions. . . . We need to articulate the themes of his [Carter's] presidency, to put things under an umbrella. . . .[35]

What is being said here, of course, is that the Carter administration has inadequately managed the news, but that he, Rafshoon, would change all that.

Once an administration decides to deliberately control the flow of information from the executive branch, it has a wide variety of manipulation techniques to choose from. The White House press corps is traditionally the primary target of this manipulation.

One of the most popular techniques is to create favorable news via the media event, and there is no finer media event than the presidential trip. Political scientists Grossman and Francis Rourke describe one of the favorites — the foreign trip:

> A foreign trip creates a ceremony of events — arrivals, meetings, parades, and departures — which the media cover lavishly, thus giving the president a maximum of favorable exposure to the audience at home in the United States. Moreover, in this kind of setting, reporters are almost entirely dependent upon official briefings and handouts for the news they receive in exchange for the bountiful coverage they supply.[36]

Nixon's China trip, occurring just prior to election time in 1972, is often cited as the classic example. Carter's staff understands the importance of trips as well:

> In the view of the White House aides, one of the most effective ways to enhance the President's image is to put Carter on the road. A traveling President is followed by an entourage of journalists who report on his every public activity. The reporters feel compelled to turn up at least one major story a day.[37]

One such classic Carter media-event was his raft trip in August 1979 down the Salmon River in Idaho:

> . . . Carter remained in the public eye, thanks to newsmen and photographers assigned to a companion raft, sophisticated communications gear and landing strips used to fly out films and stories.[38]

While such presidential trips have always been a favorite tactic, there are other tactics of which President Carter has availed himself. These include: making announcements of favorable developments from the White House (unfavorable announcements are made by the appropriate executive agency), making prepared statements at the beginning of press conferences, entertaining top news executives at the White House, increasing the use of background briefings, and timing the release of information.[39]

This last item is a Carter favorite, and he used it quite successfully in his May 1978 Sun Day speech in Colorado. Carter made a "surprise" announcement during the speech that he had pleged an additional $100 million in the next fiscal year for solar energy development. The announcement was made just prior to 6 P.M. E.D.T. — just in time to make the evening news, but not in time to be analyzed. The wire services and the networks ran with it, as did most newspapers. As it turns out, Carter's "pledge" of $100 million was, in reality, a reduction in the amount requested by Congress and the Department of Energy.

One is no doubt wondering by now why the press corps allows such manipulation — surely they are aware, as is Leubsdorf, of what is going on. They are aware, of course, but they are in no position to do very much about it. As discussed in the history of the press corps, the press has become an institutional part of the presidency. The White House press corps is tied to the presidential apron strings. It is totally dependent upon the president and his information apparatus for the daily "news" — even if the news is of the president's own making. And the White House press is not anxious to disturb this relationahip by creating too much of a fuss over "manipulation." Such dependence on the source of news is almost unique to the White House press corps. Former press secretary George Reedy explains:

> As the interest of correspondents in government officials extends primarily to their **public** [author's emphasis] acts, it is not possible for those officials to monopolize the release of their activities. Consequently, the press can approach such officials on the basis of a total independence, which cannot be sustained by those who cover the president. It is not at all unusual for newspapers to assign correspondents to cover cabinet agencies who are personally at odds with the heads of agencies, but any responsible editor will have long second thoughts before assigning to the White House a man or a woman who has personally incurred presidential wrath or even the dislike of the secretaries in the press office.[40]

Consequently, the adversative nature of the press-presidential relationship so frequently espoused in this decade's literature is, as far as the White House press corps is concerned, virtually non-existent. White House reporters are not going to rock the boat in which they are riding, as David Halberstam is well aware:

> It is an essential truth of this profession that White House reporters do not like to fight the gods, particularly Presidential gods, and they do not cherish an adversary relationship. . . . Their unwillingness to engage in an adversary relationship with the White House is exceeded only by that of most of their editors and publishers, men by and large of remarkable timidity who are made intensely nervous by any digression from the norm, no matter how terrible the norm. . . .[41]

The next logical question might be: Since the president is almost as dependent upon the press corps as the corps is upon the president (the president needs the press to get his favorable messages to the public), why doesn't the press

corps band together to boycott such manipulated messages? Timothy Crouse thought this was a sound idea, but:

> Whenever I suggested joint action to reporters around the White House, they looked at me as if I had suggested cutting off their typing fingers. They invariably launched into speeches about how reporters were fierce individualists who defied any attempt to regiment them.[42]

What is more accurately the case, of course, is that reporters are too competitive to permit concerted action. Each reporter faces a daily deadline, and if possible, would like to file his very own scoop. The likelihood of any concerted action is nil. Even in the harshest days of Nixon's news manipulation, the White House press corps could not organize any meaningful counterattack.[43] In the clinical words of the social scientists, White House reporters "have not developed a means of cooperation that would enable them to cope more effectively with the strategies employed against them."[44]

In summary, the White House has a definite edge in the relationship during the competitive phase because of its abilitity to manipulate the news. After all, the president can always bring in a Rafshoon to "coordinate" the message — no such coordination is possible among the competitive White House press corps. Also, one must not forget the president's ability not only to manipulate the news, but also to withhold it entirely, based upon executive privilege and an extensive classification system. Consequently, the White House press corps, notes David Halberstam, is "reasonably tame."[45]

In actuality, the primary impetus for competition or adversative confrontation comes from forces outside the White House press corps: the covert administration leaker, special investigative reporting teams, news sources in the various agencies, Congressional leaks and anti-White House statements. Consequently, media efforts expended in areas other than the White House press room are usually much more fruitful than any reports filed by the White House correspondents, who are too far under the thumb of the president's news operation.

**The Competive Phase: Killing the Messenger**

If the White House press corps is as harmless to the president as just described, then why, George Reedy asks, "do presidents spend so much time discussing with their confidants — and sometimes with the public — their 'press problems?' Why, then, have the relationships between presidents and the press over the years traveled such a rocky road?"[46]

Indeed, every recent president has claimed to have media "problems." They have all condemned the press for its "irresponsibility." Such attacks on the media are an inherent part of the competitive stage. Carter has been no exception Reedy believes this is a reflection of a natural human tendency:

> There is a deep-seated human tendency to confuse unhappy news with unhappy events and to assume that if the news can be altered, so can the events. This tendency is particularly accentuated among monarch . . . . Peter the Great strangled the courier who brought him the tidings of the defeat at Narva. John F. Kennedy (or at least someone on his staff) cancelled the White House subscription to the **New York Herald Tribune**. The two acts were closely related and differed only in the degree of retaliation available to the two men.[47]

In the Carter administration, the competitive phase, with its presidential news manipulation and charges of press irresponsibility, started in earnest in the summer of 1977 and continued throughout 1978 and into 1979. In the summer of 1979, the Carter administration brought the competitive phase to an end and launched with vigor into the detachment phase.

**The Detachment Phase—Detente and the Delta Queen**

The differing news definitions between the president and the media inevitably lead to a frustrated president's denunciation of the press as irresponsible. But as much as the president may come to dislike the media, he cannot avoid frequent contact with them because he needs the access to the public that the media provide, in order to persuade it to support him and his policies. As Cornwell explains, only through public support can the president accomplish his goals:

> If the chief executive's power were constitutional or party-derived, his exercise of that power would take the form of direct, face-to-face, relationships with Congress, its leaders, and party groupings. Since, however, much of his influence consists in mobilizing the mass public on behalf of his policies, it must be exercised through the news media, indirectly.[48]

Furthermore, every time the president articulates a new plan or program to the public, he inevitably alienates some who disagree with it. Consequently, Cornwell says, the president must "spend" some of his popularity points (literally, as far as the Gallup pollsters are concerned) whenever he takes a stand on a new program or policy.[49]

In order to expend as few popularity points as possible (for when they are gone, so too, to a large extent, is the president's power), the president attempts, through news management, to ensure that only favorable news about himself and his policies are presented to the media. This is the basic motivating factor behind the president's press relations during the competitive phase:

> . . . a chief executive who is adept at using the news channels certainly has the best chance of presenting his initiatives to the public in the manner least damaging to his popularity. It, of course, goes without saying that the president skillful at press relations is also in a position to maximize the usefulness of the media for building program support.[50]

But no matter how skillful a first term president is, he inevitably loses popularity points as he implements his programs and formulates his policies. (Cornwell found this to be true for every president from Eisenhower through Ford: certainly we can add Carter to the list.[51]) There comes a point in the time when a first term president no longer wishes to expend popularity points in implementing new policies — he no longer wants to "compete" with the press to make them support his ideas and programs. What he wants to do instead is run for re-election.[52]

When a president makes a conscious decision to place re-election (and therefore preserving and rejuvenating his popularity) above new programs (and thereby expending popularity points), then he has initiated the third phase — detachment.

President Carter most likely made this decision in July 1979 during his "domestic summit" at Camp David. Immediately after the summit he made his much-delayed

speech on the energy "crisis." Had the "unforeseen" foreign policy crises (Iran and Afghanistan) not occurred, this would have been his last major policy decision of his term because, while at Camp David, the Carter administration decided that after presenting their solution to the energy crisis, it was time to hit the campaign trail (unofficially, of course).

The only other "dirty work" that remained was to eliminate any dissenting voices still holding out in the administration (to shake up a cabinet any later in the term could reflect adversely on the re-election effort). This was done.

Needless to say, such controversial activities caused Carter's ratings in the polls to hit a new low. But it is also possible that the Carter administration viewed this period as a necessary clearing of the decks in preparation for the campaign. As Dom Bonafede wrote on Aug. 11, 1979, shortly after the shakeup was over, that a new period of armistice was at hand:

> The Washington press corps and the Carter White House appear to have settled upon a tenuous armistice. This is not unusual for a President two-thirds into his first term, low in the polls and about to ask for a renewal of his lease at the White House with hat in hand.[53]

Press-presidential relations during this armistice, or detachment phase as Grossman and Kumar call it, differ from relations in the competitive phase. There is still a strong amount of interdependence. In fact, the president may now need the media channels more than ever, but he needs them for a different reason. Whereas in the competitive phase the president needed favorable news for his policies and programs, he now primarily needs news that favorably portrays his image or personality. Hence, news manipulation continues, but the emphasis shifts from presidential policies to the presidential image.

Because the president does not want to do anything to damage his image, he will "detach" himself from the media, limiting his contacts to times and places of his own choosing. Grossman and Kumar explain:

> Because the stakes are now greater, his contacts with reporters are more likely to be carefully structured than they were in the middle years of his term. . . . during this period the president's staff spends increasing amounts of time arranging the chief executive's activites in order to project his image and message while freeing him to spend more time on the substance of the campaign and less with the press.[54]

And, indeed, this is precisely what the Carter administration did, starting immediately after the last persona non grata from the old cabinet was shown the door. White House correspondent Frank Van Riper explains:

> The door to Jimmy Carter's open presidency is beginning to close to the reporters who cover him. It is being replaced by staged "media events" and restricted coverage — as Carter and his image-wise aides prepare for the 1980 presidential campaign.
>
> During and after Carter's reclusive "domestic summit" at Camp David, this change became evident in several ways: the marked decrease in the number of formal White House press briefings, the emergence of an "anti-Washington" attitude reminiscent of the Nixon years, the refusal of the White House to allow even a "tight" pool of press to accompany Carter . . . and, finally, Carter's own decision to back out of his commitment, made at the start of his presidency, to hold two formal press conferences each month.[55]

And so, Carter has detached himself from many of his previous press contacts and, like any other presidential hopeful who has managed to gather a press following, he limits his press contacts to those times and places that allow favorable coverage of his "image." Carter wasted no time in this regard. Toward the end of August, while the long, hot, "newless" summer was still going strong, Carter embarked on the Mississippi riverboat, the "Delta Queen," for what can only be described as a good-old-fashioned, week-long, whistle-stopping campaign trip. It is obvious that Carter, as in his honeymoon phase, is once again "running in office."

In addition to the media-event, there is another presidential tactic that is commonly employed:

> Another aspect of the detachment phase is the White House's relatively greater emphasis on contact with the regional press and with interest groups. The president and his aides find advantages in dealing with the regional press or interest groups without the filter of the Washington press corps. Furthermore, the administration can channel information to the regional and specialized presses where they see it as having the most value for the president.[56]

Consequently, the White House press corps frequently finds itself being deliberately "bypassed" by the president.

Carter is quite adept at this tactic, which is not at all a new tactic for him — he used it during his symbolism campaign in the honeymoon period as well. **Broadcasting** magazine addresses Carter's increasing use of the regional press:

> President Carter, down in the polls and down on the national press, is making good on his promise to go directly to the people. Formal, bimonthly televised press conferences have been shelved. Instead, as the President looks ahead to what promises to be a difficult primary campaign, he is turning to radio and local television. In the process, he is making use of some of the public relations techniques that served him so well in the early days of his administration.[57]

The article goes on to describe Carter's side trip from the "Delta Queen" to host a 40-minute talk-show on station KSTT-AM in Davenport, Iowa. As was noted in **Broadcasting** magazine, Carter in his July energy speech following the Camp David summit paved the way for these campaign media-events by apologizing for his losing touch with the American people and pledging to keep in close, direct contact in the future.[58]

In closing discussion on the detachment phase, it may be upsetting to some to see the nation's leader shifting priority, from policy-making and implementation to campaigning, a full 15 months or more before the actual election. While this does, indeed, seem to be a sad state of affairs, in the defense of President Carter, it must be pointed out that the length of the presidential campaign period is growing increasingly longer. This is best highlighted by the fact that, in 1968, there were only 17 primaries — in 1980, there will probably be 37. If Carter wishes to win in 1980, he must start now — especially considering his low standing in the popularity polls.

**Conclusion**

> The current trend in the White House to limit our access to the President is unfortunate, particularly

> since this administration began with such good intentions. It is scant comfort to say that, in withdrawing from the press that covers him, Jimmy Carter is merely following the lead of Presidents who have come before him.[59]

And so, the anti-Washington, open-government administration of Jimmy Carter has turned out to be more typical than atypical. In no area was this more evident than in the administration's relationship with the media. The Carter administration progressed predictably through the stages of press-presidential relations, serving admirably a typical example.

And what of the White House press corps? It too has behaved in quite the typical manner, dutifully informing us of the president's comings and goings and relaying, usually uncritically, the president's words. In light of the inherent ability of the administration to manage and control the news, the corps cannot do otherwise.

Some critics have condemned the White House press, charging that it is lazy, incompetent and ineffectual. But such critics err — not in accusing the White House press corps of being tame, because it is and cannot be otherwise in the existing system — but in expecting the press corps to be something other than what it is. In actuality, the White House press corps exists primarily to inform the public of the comings and goings of their president.

And this the corps does very well, and probably to a greater extent than is permitted in any other major country in the world. It is not the White House press corps' job to do otherwise.

Any critic of the press corps who expects more than this has not studied the history of the relationship between the president and his press corps. The White House press corps has become a part of the institution it covers, and, inevitably, notes Timothy Crouse, the White House correspondents begin to identify with this institution:

> They begin to think of themselves as part of the White House, and they proudly identifed themselves as being "from the White House press" instead of mentioning the paper they worked for. They forgot that they were handout artists and convinced themselves that they were somehow associates of a man who was shaping epochal events.[60]

The White House press corps has become an inherent part of the presidency, and will remain so for as long as the president must rely on it as his primary means of reaching the people.

**FOOTNOTES**

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5. F. B. Marbut, **News From the Capital, The Story of Washington Reporting** (Carbondale and Edwardsville, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1971), pp. 169-170.
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10. Fairlie, p. 22.
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31. "Running in Office," **The new Republic**, 23 April 1977, p. 9.
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33. Grossman and Kumar, p. 44.
34. "Managing the News, White House Style," **U.S. News and World Report**, 4 September 1978, p. 17.
35. Robert Shrum, "Jerry Rafsoon's Ministry of Propaganda," **New Times**, 10 July 1978, p. 8.
36. Grossman and Rourke, p. 457.
37. "Managing the News . . .," p. 17.
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39. "Managing the News . . .," pp. 17-19.
40. George E. Reedy, **The Twilight of the Presidency** (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1970), pp. 101-102.
41. David Halberstam, "Press and Prejudice," **Esquire**, April 1974, p. 110.
42. Crouse, p. 244.
43. Crouse, in Chapters IX and X, describes the rather haphazard and unsuccessful attempts by members of the White House press corps to organize a counterattack to Ziegler and Nixon's news manipulation tactics.
44. Grossman and Rourke, p. 461.
45. Halberstam, p. 111.
46. Reedy, p. 105.
47. **Ibid.**
48. Cornwell, p. 56.
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51. Cornwell, p. 58.
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